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The traditional concept of the university is being challenged today by students, faculty members, and the general public. The news media have tended to aggravate, inflate, and distort university events. In some cases this kind of reporting has made public figures of those student leaders who attempt to make the university an instrument of political action or others who would preserve its structure but seek the power to govern it. Faculty interest in governance has increased, and an outraged public condemns the university's "inability to keep its own house in order." The most obvious response to these pressures has been made by university presidents, who resign as their responsibilities increase and their authority diminishes. Another response concerns university governance. The 2-tiered system, or the existence of a Board and a Senate with faculty and student participation, has been successfully attempted at the University of Western Ontario. The classroom response has been less dramatic. There seems to be no viable alternative to current lecture and examination systems, even though some efforts are being made to experiment with new teaching techniques. An important question concerns how the university may retain its autonomy while participating in governance within a system flexible enough to adapt to the rapid pace of change. It seems that the university has already begun to defend its aims with a new enthusiasm reminiscent of the intellectual revolution that produced it 100 years ago. (WM)

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THE NATURE OF THE CONTEMPORARY UNIVERSITY

An Address
by
Dr. D.C. Williams
President and Vice-Chancellor
The University of Western Ontario

to
The Annual Meeting
The Association of Universities and Colleges of Canada
Ottawa
November 6, 1968

I am told that the Chinese have a saying to the effect that they can wish for their enemies that they be born into changing times. If this is so, the enemies of the University must be happy indeed since its rate of change is such that when I was invited some three months ago to deliver this address I found it possible to consent only if the deadline were left to the last possible moment. This won a reluctant consent from Dr. Andrew on the incontestable ground that whatever its "essence" the ostensible Nature of the Contemporary University in July is not necessarily its nature in October. In the course of preparing what I have to say it became abundantly clear that what shifts is not so much the facts of the case as the meanings these facts successively acquire under a continually changing set of pressures and contexts. It follows that such validity as these comments may possess has a half life of about thirty days. In spite of this limitation there is, it seems to me, genuine worth in attempting a montage, a cross-section of the Universitv as it appears in the midst of its changes as it will be only

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from the comparison of a succession of such that it will be possible to derive some sense of the direction and speed of change as well as a sense of what is unchanging and enduring. For it should also be remembered that all such change is imposed upon a fundamental, intellectual continuity - first year physics is still concerned with the Law of Gravity, English majors still debate Hamlet's sanity, learned journals are still read and research never ceases. This point of continuity is one to which we will return.

We begin by noting that the University which educated all of us is not much more than 100 years old. It is the University that emerged from the revolutionary changes of the 1860's and 70's, the University that burst the bonds of the classical education and for the first time made English, Mathematics, Science and the like part of the curriculum. It developed all the daring innovations we now take for granted from the establishment of departments of physical education to the importation of the Ph. D. to North America. Most of all it established the concept of the University as a liberal institution devoted to the preservation, transmission and expansion of knowledge; part of society in the larger sense but apart from it in terms of specifics. Indeed it has been noted that this University developing as it did at Cornell, Hopkins and Chicago, denied itself political power in order that it should have immunity from political interference to pursue truth as it saw fit. Thus conceived and thus defined the new University

flourished and multiplied through the enthusiastic support of the public whose taxes and donations made it all possible.

One recalls that the original role of the Board of Governors was precisely that of a buffer. It is this separation of the liberal University from political power that is symbolized by the familiar town and gown dichotomy, by the images of the Ivory Tower, the absent-minded professor and all the other means by which the University as the sole institution devoted to the passion for truth was made independent of the market place.

For 100 years this liberal orientation, with its autonomy and its freedom has been deemed the best way to encourage research, teach the young and exert an influence on society at large.

Now this conception of the University is challenged on every side:-

- by student extremists whose diagnosis of its ills is dire and whose prescription is fatal.
- by student activists who would preserve its structure but thoroughly revamp and reassign the power to govern it.
- by a vigorous faculty who assert a vested and fundamental interest in its governance.
- by a public astonished and outraged at what appears to be an abdication of responsibility on the part of the

University, an inability to keep its own house in order.

I propose to examine these challenges and then turn to the ways in which the University is responding to them. Since the whole process is recorded we will begin by noting the role of the mass media.

We live as McLuhan says in an age of electric circuitry (I think he means electronics) where student-watching via the mass media has become a popular pastime with instant comment available on the profound significance of each move in the game. This pastime is, as McLuhan predicted, an involving, emotional experience for public and universities alike. Certain it is that the mass media have developed an unique capacity to "tell it as it isn't" in their single-minded absorption with violence and the threat of violence to the evident irritation of university presidents and the Canadian Union of Students alike. Both deplore this behaviour though for very different reasons. The spectacle of the freshman class in high good humour applauding its academic dignitaries might be regarded as unusual enough to merit headlines. Although this occurred in university auditoria across the country it went largely unreported since clearly "good news is no news". This bias of communication will aggravate, inflate and thereby distort the most obvious pressures on the University but it does not cause them. A typical illustration of this effect is the ego-inflation conferred by the news media on student leaders by making public figures of them, a phenomenon

recently dubbed by my colleague, Dr. Noel, as, I think, the "Rudd-Bendit Complex". "Bliss was it in that dawn to be a student leader," he adds "but to be on the CBC was very heaven."

The nub of the matter, however, is the activist philosophy since it is here that the challenge to liberalism lies. The position derives from the writings of the younger Marx at that point in time when he was concerned conceptually to rejoin thought and action. "Abstract thought" then, is unthinkable unless joined to action when it becomes "practical"; hence the term "praxis". Thought in any event is not complete until it has been acted on, therefore the selection of "issues" is an imperative in the conduct of thought since they force "confrontations" which are in turn the seed-bed out of which new and hitherto unknown dimensions of thought-with-action become possible. *

The reason for this fundamental change not only in ideas but in the very mode of thought itself is to be found in the "demonstrated" failure of liberal thought, its flabbiness, indecisiveness and seemingly endless capacity to postpone action. All of this is coupled with a condemnation of the University as having "sold out" to the "industrial-military complex". Under that baneful influence University instruction is purveyed and packaged like the processing of any other commodity, hence the notion that the University is a "knowledge factory", imprinting the requisite

* I am reminded here of a celebrated footnote in the writings of the late Dean Charles DeKoninck of Laval where he says "I can say 'all three cornered spheres are yellow' " or "I do not exist"; to which he adds the wry comment "We can say so many things we cannot even think and say them well."

skills and information, but most of all conditioning its products to accept the materialistic values of a sick society. As a final derivation from this analysis it is asserted that the University must be literally re-formed and made into an instrument of political action from which base society must similarly be changed. In the extreme case both University and society are regarded as being so rotten that they must be destroyed and the whole laborious business started again. It must be added that this is a point of view which real radicals regard as lunatic and all liberals as totalitarian.

Having thus baldly stated the activist position let me similarly over-simplify the position of the student reformer. He is anxious for a thorough overhaul of the system of University government which will give him more "power", more "participation" in the "decision making process". He is as a rule at once insistent that he sit on the Board of Governors, that its meetings be "open" and that it be abolished. He is also likely to demand seats on the Senate at least equal in number to those assigned any other segment of the University or he may press for "representation by population" on the "one man, one vote" proposal. Thus for example at Western with 10,000 students and 700 staff a Senate of 75 would yield 70 student senators and five from the faculty. (One suspects that the 70 students would soon have the Senate to themselves and shortly thereafter the University as well!) It is then this philosophy and this posture which must be assessed against the liberal tradition.

The growth of what has been recently referred to as "faculty power" is more formally stated in the recommendations of the Duff/ Berdahl Report. By "faculty power" I mean the renewal of interest and concern by the faculty in the government of the institution together with the means of expressing that concern. The widespread attitude whereby faculty members give their allegiance to their discipline and not to their institution has blunted their sensitivity to administrative matters and has as well retarded, if not destroyed, in the student mind the development of the concept of the unity of knowledge. The growth then of faculty interest in University government is a return to an earlier loyalty but in a new and healthier form which promises ameliorative side-effects to all concerned. I shall return to this point later when we get to a consideration of the one-tiered system of government.

What then have been the responses to all these pressures? The most obvious and disturbing response is that of the presidents. It is a commonplace observation that presidents, both Canadian and American, finding themselves distrusted by students, faculty and public alike, deserted by governments and doubted by Boards decide in increasing numbers that the game is not worth the candle and resign usually in favour of the less frustrating and more rewarding life of a senior professor. As the pressures and indignities mount the post becomes increasingly distasteful to senior academics. This change in the status and longevity of presidents is best illustrated by an example. I have a

friend whose grandfather was the president of a distinguished American University for 40 years. My predecessor held office for 20 years. A prudent and conservative Board was careful to set a maximum of ten years on the invitation extended to me, and as this is being written rumour has it that two other recent appointees refused terms longer than seven and five years respectively. Nor is there, of course, any guarantee that these incumbents will stay the course. Indeed when I last looked there were three universities in Canada searching for presidents. We are now virtually at the stage where the new president who greets the freshman class will resign when they graduate.

As McGeorge Bundy pointed out in his recent article in "The Atlantic" for September, the University no longer takes its colouration and shape from its president as did Harvard in the days of President Elliott; now the roles are reversed. It is further to be noted and with alarm that, as the president's authority has diminished, his responsibilities have increased, always a dangerous, unstable and ultimately impossible condition in any administrative structure. The current theory of the university presidency is no longer that of the captain of the ship. Today he finds himself in the role of seeking within the university community a resolution of forces that are or appear to be fundamentally opposed. It is he who must be the engineer of consensus, nor is there any other who can fill this role. It follows that, once he is elected, selected or appointed he must have a generous share of "president power"

if he is to perform his functions effectively.

We turn now to another response, the much-debated question of the merits of the single-tiered system of University government; a proposition first advanced by Dr. Bissell four years ago and now most recently recommended for practical trial in the report of Dr. Douglas Wright on the Ontario College of Art. I welcome this as an experiment which can be tried with relative safety in a fairly small and homogeneous institution.

I wish, however, to direct your attention to another experiment in University government which began in my own institution with the passage of The University of Western Ontario Act of June 1967. This Act is essentially a legal version of the Duff/Berdahl Report. While retaining the two-tiered system in the continuing existence of both a Board and a Senate, each is substantially changed, particularly the Senate which is now faculty-dominated with a majority of elected faculty members and academic deans, plus six representatives of the community elected by the Senate, two governors of the University appointed by the Board and three students elected by the student body. In addition the Board has been reformed in that four elected senators sit as governors together with the three vice-presidents of the University who sit ex-officio. After a year's experience it is clear that the Senate and the Board are roughly co-equals. There is a clear policy as well as a general inclination of the Board to defer to the Senate in academic matters even though the Senate does not display the same diffidence in debating the

financial implications of academic policies. Similarly the Senate while eager to explore financial implications and to participate in budget making and the like is reasonably content with those provisions of the Act which reserve final decisions in such matters to the Board as the public trustee of the institution. The concern of the Senate as I see it has been to make sure that its voice is heard and taken into account when important decisions are reached. This state of affairs now exists. The upshot has been the unleashing of an enormous quantity of productive work by the Senate as a whole and by its committees, a process which has infused new health and vigor into the University. This system which confers real power on the Senate and better communications between the Senate, Board and students has had two results. The first is that the Board is tending to become an "Upper House", but an "Upper House" which, in its capacity of public trustee retains a position of vigour and responsibility with both veto and initiating powers. It follows that the members of such a working Senate and indeed those who elected them are becoming progressively reluctant to contemplate a single-tiered system where with the elimination of the Board, their majority control in the Senate would be diluted substantially, if not eliminated altogether.

The twin response to "openness" and "student participation" begin to fall into perspective when seen in the context of the system of government above described. My Senate began by adopting the general principle of closed meetings while at the same time making provision for open

meetings on request. This was followed shortly by the decision to make Senate Minutes available to all members of the University community and to the local press. There is now a Notice of Motion before the Senate which if passed will provide for a small spectators' gallery for all except very special meetings. A similar process of social evolution is discernible in the attitude of the Senate toward its student members. Once they were discovered to be effective and responsible colleagues they suffered the fate of all responsible senators, that of being appointed to too many committees. The result is that the Senate now has another Notice of Motion before it providing for the addition of three student observers to be elected by the students at large, as full participants in the Senate except that under the Act they would have no vote. It is noteworthy that the three serving student senators exert an influence far beyond their numbers. The proposal to increase student numbers will have little or no effect on their influence; it is instead an efficient, humanitarian device designed to spread the work more equitably.

In many ways the response in the classroom is less dramatic than in the governing of the institution. This is in part because the activist alternative of the "free University" with unstructured discussion is weak and vague and in part because, with all its imperfections on its head, no one has yet demonstrated a viable alternative for dealing with the large numbers we all face. As Professor Northrop Frye points out, there is nothing in the much-abused lecture system that prevents students

from reading books or from thinking about what they hear or even, in solitude or in discussion, searching out for themselves the "relevance" and "meaningfulness" for their own lives of the disciplines under study.

In the same way the highly imperfect examination system remains the necessary consequence of increasing numbers. Certainly it has been accepted for decades in most universities that examinations are seldom necessary in say graduate seminars or small senior honours undergraduate courses. Again, where they have been used under these circumstances they have more often than not proved to be a congenial challenge to the brilliant student; an opportunity for him to demonstrate his capacity to himself as well as to his teachers.

The reform in the classroom is being substantially aided by the formation of staff/student committees at the departmental level and by the growing willingness of both to experiment with a variety of new teaching techniques. As a senior and highly respected colleague put it recently "they still want to learn but they don't want to be taught - at least in the old way".

I mentioned earlier that I would return to the subject of continuity. I mean by this the inherent stability of the institution which underlies all of the changes that attract our attention. These are as I indicated the continuing functions of the University. I refer to its teaching, its research, the "electric contact that still occurs between the teacher and the student", the capacity of a well-designed course in the hands of a good

teacher to stimulate and challenge a student; the gift of time for study and reflection, and the freedom to use or to waste it. Somehow amidst its rapid changes, the University is working, however much it is in need of improvement it has not ground to a halt, nor failed, nor died.

Inevitably the harsh criticisms directed against the University have provoked responses in kind. The first wave of these, the emotional reactions either of excessive indignation at insult or a fearful "give them whatever they want" compliance on the other have passed. Not only did these play directly into the hands of the student politicians but the criticisms themselves lost their capacity to shock through sheer repetition.

There seems now to be a second reaction developing. It became apparent this fall in a growing rejection by the freshman class of the activist position as evidenced say by the lively distaste for Farber's garbage and an increasing scepticism of the gospel of rampant egalitarianism. A similar but much more serious trend is evident in the hardening of public attitudes against the University in general and the activists in particular. Many observers have stressed the real danger of a swing of public opinion to the right which they see as potentially severe. This in turn would force the activists to progressively more extreme positions which by further alienating public opinion would bring about a loss of public support for the University as a whole. It is hard to see how this could develop without bringing in its train direct political interference in the affairs

of the University and hence the end of University autonomy and of academic freedom.

While this danger is real it is fortunately, avoidable. In my introduction I made the point that the University under attack today is the product of the vigorous intellectual revolution of 100 years ago. The essence of that revolution was that it was self-directed; the universities themselves caught and taught the larger vision that infused staff, students and public alike with enthusiasm for its new ways of doing things. (One thinks, for example, of President Andrew White writing an indignant letter to Ezra Cornell berating him for spending too much time in developing his railroad empire "when a great university is in the making"). I am optimist enough to claim to detect the signs of a renaissance of this early attitude. The University has begun, under this sharp prodding to move, to assert itself, to take things into its own hands and to become again the engineer of its own destiny. What is wanted is a new framework stable enough to permit the University to get on with its work yet flexible enough to adapt to the rapid pace of change. Some of these beginnings are identifiable and indeed I have already foreshadowed one such, namely the continuing debate on single vs two-tiered systems of University government. I said earlier that I welcomed the possibility of the single-tiered experiment but it must be remembered that such a trial permits only negative results. That is to say if the experiment fails in this setting it is reasonable to expect that it would also fail in the more complex

setting of a University. On the other hand if it is successful it does not at all follow that it would be similarly successful at the University level. I drew attention as well to the on-going comprehensive experiment in government at my own University the design of which makes possible the whole gamut of results. Our experiment however will need at least the five years guaranteed it under our Act before it can be adequately assessed. The experiment already contains, even in its embryo state, some tantalizing possibilities for the future. Is it, for example, possible that, based on this model, the present Committee of Presidents in Ontario might with some reorganization play Senate to the Committee on University Affairs' Board of Trustees?

Such speculation invites a more substantial discussion of the emerging concept of University systems or consortia than is here possible. While again Canadian experience in such things is limited, the Ontario model has the advantage of convenience and of being well-known. The necessity for developing such systems is obvious to governments which bear an increasing proportion of the cost of University education. There are real academic and administrative advantages to be had as well in such things as the development of a provincial library system and the establishment of formula financing. What has yet to be spelled out are the means by which the individual University may retain that autonomy which it must have while still participating in the decisions that affect the system as a whole. The Contemporary University is engaged in forging

anew and under pressure its aims and aspirations. If it is the liberal tradition that is under fire then let it stand and fight for its existence in the market-place of ideas. The exertion involved is a great curer of flabbiness, smugness and conceit. The intellectual effort required is that of being forced to detect and distinguish the ideal and enduring from the merely habitual and convenient. Thus will we be renewed or if we fail, thus destroyed. In its mode of government and its role in contemporary society the University may well heed the words of Leonardo da Vinci - "When besieged by ambitious tyrants I find a means of offense and defence in order to preserve the chief gift of Nature, which is liberty".

When Dr. Andrews asked me to undertake this paper he kindly assured me that however indifferent my performance the theme was bound to provoke ample discussion. I therefore confidently await the answers that should have been apparent to my myopic vision.